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ABSTRACT

Most of the research on the assessment of the intelligence of Latinos in the United States appears to be based on some possibly erroneous or at least dubious assumptions. Among these are the following: (1) the assumption of bilinguality, (2) the assumption of equal proficiency in the English language; (3) the assumption of the equivalence of literal translations from English to Spanish; (4) the assumption of population homogeneity with respect to socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic factors; (5) the assumption of the language uniformity of Spanish; (6) the assumption that testing can be culture-free; (7) the assumption of the superior quality of investigations of Latinos conducted by Latinos. This paper evaluates the evidence for each of the above assumptions, and concludes that great caution should be exercised to avoid taking them too much for granted. (Author)

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La Medición de la Inteligencia de los Latinos en los Estados Unidos

The Assessment of the Intelligence of Latinos in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

It is now over fifty years since investigators began to evaluate the intellectual functioning and the assessment of the intelligence of children in the United States of Latin origin who come from predominantly Spanish-speaking homes. Most studies have been in the American tradition of hard-nosed empiricism, with considerable emphasis placed on the development of sophisticated techniques of measurement. And yet, after fifty of such research it is fair to say we know very little about their intelligence has tended to be of dubious value and accuracy.

In 1975 the United States Commission on Civil Rights indicated that there was a great need for the collection of additional data relevant to the problems of the Latino. However, it is fair to say that in the past fifty years so many investigators have been conducted on and about Latinos that it is difficult to believe that there is a serious problem concerning the quality data gathered, the manner in which it was collected, and perhaps, most important of all, the assumptions that have guided most investigators in the past.

Some of the assumptions frequently made taht appear to be at least partially false are the following:

1. THE ASSUMPTION OF BILINGUALITY.

Since the earliest evaluations, it has been assumed that Latinos are bilingual. That is, that they speak both Spanish and English fluently and equally well. The possibility that this might not be the case, especially with regard to the competence of Latinos in English, has rarely been considered seriously. Yet evidence pointing to the erroneous nature of this assumption has been around since 1924. At that time Sheldon noted that the Mexican-American children he tested "understood English very imperfectly." Similarly, Garretson (1928) stated that it was "unusual" for a Mexican-American to enter school with any knowledge of English. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the "bilingual" nature of the Latinos might be more complex and at least in part the product of an interaction between the English or Spanish language and either it's association with home or school environments (Barker, 1944).

In fact, it appears that there are some Latinos in the United States who speak neither English nor Spanish. The occurence and widespread nature of a dialect referred to as Spanglish is a contemporary phenomenon, particularly among Puerto Ricans in New York and Cubans in Miami. Spanglish is a dialect not comprehensible to traditional speakers of either language. For example, it is common for Puerto Ricans in New York to refer to "techo" as "el roofo"; among Cubans in Miami "poner el disco" becomes "jugar el disco." The word "almuerzo" becomes "lunch" in New York and "lonche" in Miami. Spanglish appears ever on the increase and it may be expected to become a dominant tongue among certain Latino groups in the United States in the future. Such a development will serve only to further isolate those groups from both Anglo-American and Spanish-speaking peoples.

2. THE ASSUMPTION OF EQUAL PROFICIENCY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

It is assumed that Latinos have equal proficiency in the English language when in fact their competence in English varies from excellent to non-existent. It is further assumed that whatever the level of proficiency present the scores on English language tests derived from a Latino population may be compared directly with the performance of Anglo-Americans. Despite this tradition, comparing the scores of a Latino child with some, little, or no knowledge of English with the scores of an Anglo-American population remains an absurd procedure. It is as absurd as giving a test of Spanish comprehension to American children with one year of training in Spanish and comparing their scores with those of children of the same age tested in Buenos Aires.

The absurdity of such a procedure was demonstrated by Jacobson, Prio, Ramírez, Fernández, and Hevia (1976, in press). These investigators found that Anglo-Americans exposed to Spanish in a bilingual school program in Florida obtained a mean IQ of 41.79 on a Caribbean version of the Stanford-Binet administered in Cuban-accented Spanish. Even Chicanos evaluated by Anglo-American investigators in California and Texas score better than that!

3. THE ASSUMPTION OF THE EQUIVALENCE OF LITERAL TRANSLATIONS FROM ENGLISH TO SPANISH.

The need for Spanish language IQ scales has been long recognized. However, in the construction of such scales, it was often assumed that literal translations from English to Spanish would preserve the validity of the original test. Yet, this belief was contested as early as 1934 by Sanchez. Indeed the use of literal translations is similar to the

use of parallel forms in traditional psychometrics. Sanchez pointed out that it was not always possible to find an exact equivalent for one language in another. For example, he noted that the translation of the English word "picture" on the Stanford-Binet as "retrato" poses serious problems. In fact, there is no equivalent in Spanish for the English word "picture." Words such as "retrato," "cuadro," and "lamina" are similar but none really means "picture" as that word is used in English. All Spanish translation of English language tests appear to suffer to some extent from this problem.

Of course this difficulty is not confined to English and Spanish, but occurs in translations between any two languages. Frequently scales are translated from English to languages such as Swahili. It is a moot point how happy North Americans would be if they were required to take an intelligence test composed originally in Swahili for use with Kenyans that was translated literally into English by an Oxford professor for use in the public schools of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

4. THE ASSUMPTION OF POPULATION HOMOGENEITY.

An implicit assumption in dealing with the Latinos is that all individuals and subgroups within the Latino community may be viewed interchangeably and that the results of investigations with one group may be generalized to others. This assumption may be quickly disproved by noting that Latinos in the United States may be of Chicano, Cuban, Gallego, or Filipino origin, just to mention a few of the possibilities. The Latino may have recently come to the United States or have been born here; he may be rich or poor, young or old, live in a burned-out slum in

the Bronx or a farming community in Kansas. The Latino may be Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Santero, or Hindu; he may be black, white, yellow, red, mulatto, mestizo, or trigueño.

5. THE ASSUMPTION OF THE LANGUAGE UNIFORMITY OF SPANISH.

As a result of the "assumed homogeneity" of the Latino population, it is assumed that all members of the Latino community, regardless of their ethnic origin, speak a common form of Spanish. The assumption of language uniformity extends to the use of language and terminology as well as with regard to accent. However, this assumption is quite naïve. Latinos speak different forms of Spanish including Mexican, Filipino, and Puerto Rican among others, and these are not the same. Conclusive evidence for this fact may be noted from studies demonstrating that Latino children with less than perfect English may score lower on a Castellano version of the Stanford-Binet than on the original English language version (Keston & Jimenez, 1954).

6. THE ASSUMPTION THAT TESTING CAN BE CULTURE-FREE.

In many ways, the entire history of intelligence testing with Latinos and other ethnic groups represents a search for a culture-free test. It is generally assumed that if not now then sometime in the future, it will be possible to construct a general test of intelligence that can be applied to all cultural groups, regardless of thier differences, anywhere in the world in any language.

Implied in this belief is the assumption that there is some "true intelligence quotient" free from culture and class waiting to be discovered.

It should be noted that this generally prevalent belief has never been proven. It is one of the grimmest aspects of modern life that this unproved thesis has provided an intellectual rationale for systematic efforts at the extermination of entire peoples. Any belief for which there is no convincing evidence and that has provided a conceptual basis for genocide from Auschwitz to Buchenwald and racist barbarism from Selma, Alabama to Rhodesia is one that should be held only by those either with no knowledge of history or those so brutalized as to represent a menace to the rest of mankind.

7. THE ASSUMPTION OF THE SUPERIOR QUALITY OF INVESTIGATIONS OF LATINOS CONDUCTED BY LATINOS.

It has often been assumed that Latino investigators because of their ethnic affiliation must be necessarily free of the biases and prejudices of non-Latino investigators and that therefore their studies will be more valid than others. However, it is our point that to the extent that Latino investigators accept the beliefs discussed herein they themselves consitute a source of racism that can only serve to further demoralize the Latino people. That Latino investigators do share most of these beliefs with their Anglo-American peers is beyond question.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this decade, Kenneth Gergen wrote:

> The 'classic assumptions' in any field of investigation are often the most dangerous. Because they typically embody a significant slice of reality, they compel the neophyte and provide just enough periodic reinforcement to the professional to persist in perpetuity Refinements, correctives, and modifications are strewn by the wayside;

all prove too taxing to the mind drawn by the beauty and drama of the simple premise. Assumptions frame one's view of reality and guide one's observation, thus leaving entire realms of thought and observation uncultivated. Words are fearsome things; in a single statement a thousand doors may be closed. (1970, p. 495).

Scientific research concerning the intelligence of Latinos, as well as other ethnic groups such as the blacks in the United States, provides an eloquent portrayal of the profound truth of Gergen's words.

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FOOTNOTE

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